IT'S OUR BUSINESS

Alcohol, drugs and gambling in the workplace

Dealing with the Troubled Employee

Dealing with an employee with a job performance problem is not easy. The experience can be as stressful for the supervisor as it is for the employee. However, job performance issues must be addressed and early intervention is the key.

Job performance problems often start small and develop slowly. In the early stages there may be just a few isolated incidents and these may easily be overlooked.

A supervisor may miss opportunities for early intervention for a number of reasons. There may not be policies and procedures in place to support the supervisor in the intervention process. The supervisor may not have the knowledge or confidence to deal with the situation. The supervisor may be trying to be helpful and "give the employee a break" by allowing poor performance to go unchallenged. It may seem easier to ignore the problem in the hope it will go away. Sometimes an employee with a job performance problem may improve without intervention; most often the problem will only get worse if ignored.

It is important to deal with a job performance problem in the early stages while the issues are small. Performance issues can deteriorate to the point of crisis if the early warning signals are not acknowledged and dealt with. The performance of one employee can affect the productivity of other employees. Poor job performance can place the employee, co-workers and the public at risk.

Read on to learn more about

- identifying the troubled employee
- recording what you observe
- preparing to meet with the employee
- meeting with the employee
- following up to ensure success

IDENTIFYING THE TROUBLED EMPLOYEE

Changes in employee behaviour can signify that an individual may have a personal problem that is interfering with their work performance. There are "red flags" in an employee's behaviour that can be used as indicators. There is usually no single event, but rather a noticeable pattern of change in the employee's behaviour, attitude or work activity. Individually, these signs may seem harmless enough but taken together they may represent a serious problem. It is important to avoid ignoring the initial indicators.

These are some of the signs that might help you identify an employee who has a problem.

Changes in workplace performance

- changes in productivity
- attendance problems, absences from the work area
- procrastination, inability to concentrate
- accidents or incidents, safety infractions
- complaints from other workers or customers
- changes in quality of work
- poor judgment, confusion, forgetfulness
- exaggerating work accomplishments
- making excuses for substandard work
- changes in appearance

Do not ignore the initial indicators of a job performance problem.

Changes in behaviour, attitude and activity

Personal problems can cause changes in behaviour and attitude. Changes in mood, defensiveness and inappropriate outbursts can be easily noticed, particularly if these behaviours are a departure from the employee's usual demeanor.

These indicators may be helpful in identifying employees who have significant personal problems. However, this does not mean that all individuals having personal problems will exhibit these traits. Nor does it mean that all individuals exhibiting these traits have personal problems.

Look for changes in how people do things.

RECORDING WHAT YOU OBSERVE

It is critical to observe behaviour, not diagnose personal problems. Recording what you see and hear is necessary when a pattern of deteriorating performance emerges. Well-substantiated documentation will provide objective information to set the stage for possible corrective action. It will also help the employer/supervisor avoid becoming personally involved in the employee's problems. The behaviours that are documented must be observable and verifiable. It is also very important to follow your company's specific guidelines for documenting employee performance to ensure that you are in compliance with privacy legislation.

How to document

- Write down incidents as they happen. Be factual, with date, time and specifics clearly noted.
- Record actual incidents, not impressions or gossip.
- Be fair. Don't cite something as problematic if it is a workplace norm (e.g., long coffee breaks).
- Be consistent.
- Keep documentation confidential.
- Stay relevant to job performance.

What to document

The signs that identify a troubled employee are the signs to document. You do not need a long list of recorded observations in order to meet with an employee. Early intervention is key to assisting employees whose work performance is being affected by personal problems.

PREPARE TO MEET WITH THE EMPLOYEE

When deteriorating performance has been documented, there are various steps an employer/supervisor can take to prepare for the formal interview with the employee. These include:

- Discuss the matter with management or human resources personnel to clarify applicable company policies.
- Contact the Employee Assistance Program, if available, to discuss the advisability and procedure for referral.
- Gather and summarize all related documentation (e.g., incident reports, past job performance reviews) to look for patterns or previous occurrences.
- Identify objectives and timelines—what does the employee need to do, and by when, to rectify the situation.
- Identify consequences if the performance problem continues.
- Try to anticipate the employee's reaction so that you can be prepared.
- For unionized employees, you may also need to involve a union representative prior to meeting with the employee.

The primary objective is not to determine the employee's underlying problem. The objective is to advise the employee of the specifics of his or her poor performance and to get agreement on the process to obtain improved future performance.

Stay focused on job performance; don't try to diagnose underlying personal problems.

MEETING WITH THE EMPLOYEE

The employer/supervisor must discuss the job performance concerns with the employee, being clear about the reason for the meeting and specific about the issues. It is important to be non-judgmental, to state the facts and keep the discussion focused. The following are guidelines to assist in the meeting process.

Schedule a private meeting

Pick a time when you and the employee are most likely to be uninterrupted and when both of you are calm.

Discuss current performance

Discuss the employee's current performance. Rely on the information you have observed and documented.

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Get input from the employee

Rather than telling the employee what you think should be changed, ask for his or her ideas about how performance can be improved. Discuss solutions rather than focusing strictly on the problem.

Advise the employee

Advise the employee of the corrective action that must be taken. The goal is to highlight the changes that you see in the employee's behaviours, attitudes and activities and to focus on improved future performance. The employee must be very clear about the objectives and what he or she must do to rectify the performance problems.

Set timelines

Talk with the employee about the timelines in which improvement should occur.

Be clear about next steps

Talk with the employee about what will happen if job performance does not improve. Consequences must be clearly spelled out in advance so there are no surprises if further action is required.

Anticipate the employee admitting a problem

If the employee tells you that he or she has an alcohol or drug problem, you will likely need to involve others such as your manager or occupational health representative. This is especially true if the employee works in a safety-sensitive position. You must practise *due diligence*—not knowingly allowing someone to work when they have the potential to harm themselves or others. If your company has an alcohol and drug policy, it will likely contain information to guide you in these situations.

Remember not to counsel the employee or prescribe solutions—your job is to focus on improving job performance. Leave diagnosis and counselling up to the professionals.

Direct sources of help

Remind the employee that assistance is available if personal factors are contributing to the unacceptable work performance. Provide a brochure outlining the services of your Employee and Family Assistance Program or a listing of community agencies that can help with a variety of personal concerns.

Offer encouragement

Offer encouragement to the employee that you believe performance can improve. The tone is one of working with the employee to support change, but the employee must be responsible for rectifying the performance problem.

FOLLOW-UP TO ENSURE SUCCESS

During the meeting, the employer/supervisor and the employee have set up a plan of action for improving work performance. It's important that this plan is recorded, either during the meeting or in a letter summarizing the action plan afterward. The plan will include a time frame for a further assessment of job performance. It is very important to follow through with scheduled performance reviews to ensure that agreed-upon action plans are being carried out. Meetings with the employee on an ongoing basis are important to deal with concerns as they arise. Follow-up meetings are also a great opportunity to recognize improved performance and provide encouragement to the employee. If job performance is not improving, the employer/supervisor must follow through with the agreed-upon next steps.

EMPLOYEE SUBSTANCE ABUSE/GAMBLING

Alcohol/drug abuse or problem gambling may be underlying poor job performance. People with an alcohol/drug or gambling problem are not always willing to admit to it or talk about it. They may protect and hide their substance use or gambling for as long as they can. You may suspect the real problem, but approaching an employee with your suspicions may result in a denial. To avoid getting caught up in the denial, keep your focus on job performance and on observable behaviours. For example, you could say, "Your speech was slurred, you were having difficulty standing, I could smell alcohol on your breath and you fell asleep at your work station" instead of "You were drunk."

An employer/supervisor must intervene immediately if a worker is showing signs that he or she is not fit for work. A worker who appears to be under the influence of alcohol or other drugs is not fit for work and represents a safety risk to himself or herself and others. Some suggested steps follow:

1. Decide on an immediate course of action. The employee being allowed to work is *not* an option.
2. Get a witness, if possible.
3. Call the worker aside. Avoid confronting the employee among his or her co-workers.
4. Tell the worker he or she does not appear able to work and needs to leave the job site.
5. Listen to the response, but do not attempt to reason or negotiate. Assure the worker you will talk when she or he returns to work.
6. Make arrangements for the worker to be safely transported from the work site so he or she does not drive.

7. Document the date, time and specifics of the incident.
8. Meet with the employee upon his or her return to work. Advise the worker of the consequences.

Employees may not be fit for work for a variety of reasons besides alcohol or drug use. Even tiredness can affect an employee's ability to work safely and well. Because medical or emotional problems could also affect fitness for work, you may wish to have the employee transported to an occupational health or other medical facility for assessment prior to being sent home. Your company's alcohol and drug policy may outline additional steps to be taken in these situations.

For more information

AADAC (Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission) offers a range of services to assist businesses in managing workplace substance use and gambling concerns. These services include

Information/Resources • Besides the *It's Our Business Information Series*, AADAC offers several resources for workplace leaders and employees.

The *It's Our Business* manual gives leaders in the workplace the information they need to build a healthy, well-functioning workplace team. This practical, well-organized binder offers clear information and insightful advice in an easy-to-follow format, based on a philosophy of fitness for work. Employers and managers are advised to remain focused on what is their business: the employee's ability to do his or her job.

To supplement the manual, AADAC offers three brochures to inform employees and enlist them as allies in creating a workplace that is free from the problems created by the abuse of alcohol, other drugs and gambling:

- *Is Drinking, Using Drugs or Gambling Affecting My Work?* helps employees to assess whether their work is being affected by their substance use or gambling and offers suggestions on finding further help.
- *Someone at Work Has a Problem* guides employees in intervening with a co-worker who may have an alcohol, other drug or gambling problem by outlining workplace indicators and tips for a successful intervention.
- *What You Need to Know About Fitness for Work* outlines the concept of fitness for work, and describes how substance use and gambling affect fitness for work, what an employee can do to be fit for work, and what one can do when others are not fit for work.

For more information on these and other resources from AADAC, call 310-0000/780-427-7319 (in Alberta) or 1-800-280-9616 or check the website at www.aadac.com

Employer Consultations • If you are concerned about an employee's substance use or gambling and would like to discuss strategies to intervene, contact the AADAC office nearest you.

Client Services • AADAC's network of services offers information sessions, assessment, individual and group counselling, and intensive treatment to any Albertan concerned about a substance use or gambling problem. Contact the nearest AADAC office for information.

Treatment Programs for Employees • The AADAC Business and Industry Clinic offers residential treatment programs specifically for the workplace. Located at the Northern Addictions Centre in Grande Prairie, the clinic offers a complete range of services to meet the needs of employees with substance abuse or gambling problems, as well as the needs of the referring party. Services include detoxification, a 30-day alcohol and drug program, a 50-day cocaine program, a family program and extensive follow-up programs. For more information, call 780-538-6316 or 1-800-419-1149.

Training for the Workplace • AADAC offers training to assist businesses in addressing substance abuse and gambling in the workplace. Training topics include understanding addiction, alcohol and drug policy development, and supervisory training on dealing with the troubled employee. Workshops can be custom designed and delivered at the worksite. For more information, contact your local AADAC area office.

AADAC
ALBERTA ALCOHOL AND DRUG ABUSE COMMISSION

For more information, contact your local AADAC office,
call 1-866-33AADAC or visit our website at www.aadac.com

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